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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 USNATO 000573

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SUBJECT: FORMER KFOR COMMANDER OPTIMISTS ON KOSOVO, BUT
STRESSES NEED TO PREPARE FOR ANYTHING

Classified By: DCM Richard G. Olson for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: Outgoing KFOR Commander Lieutenant General Roland Kather (Germany), gave his final briefing to an informal meeting of the NAC in an expanded session with all KFOR troop contributing nations. General Kather emphasized that the situation in Kosovo, while currently quiet, nevertheless remains fragile and unpredictable. Kather said that while not technically falling under his mandate, the difficulties of security can not be separated from the economic and social issues facing Kosovo. He further highlighted KFOR's decision to plan for all post December 10 possible contingencies. Kather voiced his opinion that taking a neutral stand between the parties in Kosovo was crucial to KFOR earning and keeping respect in the region. The General commented that there were a few flaws in KFOR and the intelligence situation was highlighted as needing improvement. Allies roundly lauded Kather for his work over the last year as KFOR Commander. Most also voiced various concerns and questions for future stability in Kosovo and the surrounding regions as the December 10 deadline approaches.

KATHER'S YEAR AS KFOR COMMANDER

¶2. (C) General Kather's review of the last year reflected his own admission that he was "an optimist." While admitting that there were improvements that need to be made, Kather was clearly proud of his work in KFOR and the force itself. Kather began by noting that while economics and social policy were not under his mandate, he believed they were an essential piece of the security equation that could not be ignored. He noted the unemployment rate in Kosovo as being between 40 percent to 80 percent at any given time, so most of the money in the economy was not being produced in Kosovo. Rather, most of the money in the economy was from remittances and organized crime. Kather said he took a broad approach to security decisions which included an awareness and of the impact of the economic situation.

¶3. (C) Kather also said that he told his successor of the importance of continuing a broad approach. He noted that most countries had given up their caveats and he was generally given flexibility, which was important to successfully complete his missions, and helped him to execute his missions impartially. That approach meant engaging in activities around Kosovo that were not directly related to security (such as building a school and facilitating civil society programs), which helped make KFOR's presence in the

region both more acceptable and more welcome to the general population.

¶4. (C) General Kather also made clear his belief that certain improvements were needed in KFOR, led by the need for improved intelligence.

¶5. (C) In regards to the future, Kather noted the necessity for "prudent military planning to stay on task." He said that there did remain open questions. First, what to do about inadequate staffing of the civilian-military organizations? Second, what would be the framework for future training of a new Kosovo Security Force? In regards to the second question he noted his belief that the framework nations should take over the responsibility of dealing with it. Finally, he commented that the structure he had put in place had been exceedingly helpful. He had a task force of 16,000 and no one was responsible for the North or South or Central areas, they were simply all just responsible for Kosovo, a message that resonated with both the forces and the people of Kosovo. He ended by noting that he hoped for the best, but it is important to plan for the worst. The best outcome would be a continued dynamic and clear vision among the international community which will be able to maintain quiet and calm regardless of what happens after December 10, and the worst would be a unilateral declaration followed by Kosovar Serbs fleeing across the borders and mass chaos.

ALLIES: CONGRATULATIONS AND QUESTIONS

¶6. (C) Allies unanimously offered congratulations to General Kather on a job well done before asking him follow up questions to his comments.

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¶7. (C) In response to questions regarding Serbia's role and his relationship with Serb armed forces, the General noted that he had developed a good relationship with their armed forces. He noted that it is likely that the decision whether Kosovar Serbs will stay in Kosovo after December 10 or not will likely be handed down from Belgrade. His sense was that most want to stay but that they will follow Belgrade's decision. Nevertheless, Kather made a point of saying that in his opinion, most Kosovar Serbs are becoming frustrated by the lack of clarity that exists regarding the immediate future. In addition, he commented that most are not even paying attention to the politics as they are much more concerned about day to day necessities, such as feeding their families. He concluded discussion on the issue by noting that he personally did not believe there would be a mass exodus and that, if there was one, it might be more for show with people returning later on.

¶8. (C) He noted in response to some Allies' comments that he believed cooperation with the EU was vital and that even improbable scenarios (such as the possibility of chaos developing on the Macedonian border) could not be excluded no matter how unlikely, and should be prepared for.

¶9. (C) The General responded that while he does not expect standing armies of Serbia or other nations to interfere and begin conflict in a unilateral declaration of independence scenario, he said that there was a concern over the operations of paramilitary groups doing so. Again, he referred back to his belief that it was necessary to prepare for anything.

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